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Jack Anderson

U.S. Intelligence in Iran Catching Up

One of the sorrier aspects of the U. S. humiliation in Iran has been the pathetic inability of our intelligence to provide reliable information on which President Carter and his advisers could base their decisions.

Indeed, the confusion and contradictions in U.S. intelligence reports may have indirectly caused the hostage situation, by convincing Carter he could safely ignore the warnings he undeniably received. Both the State Department and Central Intelligence Agency warned him that retaliation would follow if the shah were admitted to this country. The president had no adequate yardstick to use in measuring the validity of the conflicting intelligence reports he was getting.

In past columns, I have reported how the CIA was caught unaware by the events that overtook the shah. The CIA was so close to the shah that it did not develop contacts among the diverse factions opposed to the shah.

This worked fine as long as the CIA's puppet remained in power. But since the shah's ouster, U.S. intelligence has been playing a desperate game of catch-up ball. As a result, Washington was caught off base when the militants seized our embassy in Tehran.

Only recently were our analysts able to give the president and his advisers an educated guess as to who is actually running the show in Iran — the vital first step in solving the hostage situation. I can now reveal the conclusions presented at top-secret meetings of the National Security Council on the confusing and chaotic situation in Tehran.

First of all, the militant "students"

originally conceived the idea of seizing the embassy, though they were given inspiration, or at least justification, by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's inflammatory speeches a few days earlier, intelligence analysts told my associate Dale Van Atta.

Since the takeover, a symbiotic mutual dependence has developed between the ayatollah and the radicals in the embassy. While both sides are partly independent of the other, they also seem to be holding each other hostage.

The students have ignored or countermanded Khomeini's orders on at least half a dozen occasions, my sources say, and clearly refuse to take orders from the ruling Revolutionary Council. Yet they are politically realistic enough to recognize that the ayatollah has far broader support than they do among the Iranian public. Ultimately, they realize, Khomeini's wishes will be decisive. They can't afford to defy him absolutely.

For his part, Khomeini needs the militants to divert the Iranians from the staggering domestic problems he faces, both with the faltering economy and the potentially ruinous clamor by the minorities for autonomy. So he was forced to fire his first two foreign ministers, whom the militants considered too conciliatory to the United States.

As for the identity of the embassy captors, the National Security Council has now identified five distinct factions. Three are bonafide student groups of differing ideologies. The fourth consists of Marxist, nonstudent radicals. The fifth is a military/elite

group, known as the "Security Force," trained by the Palestine Liberation Organization. It includes some members of the PLO cadre. This last group, trained as a sort of SS for the ayatollah, mined the embassy grounds when U. S. military action was threatened.

The analysts have concluded that the unpredictable Khomeini is, in the end, the man who must be dealt with in the hostage situation.